

The Self-Esteem Fraud

The Self-Esteem Fraud: Feel-Good Education Does Not Lead to Academic Success (abridged)

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USA Today (Magazine), January 1998

Americans have lost confidence in their public schools. A 1996 *Washington Post* survey asked people what worries them about the future. They were given dozens of choices, from high crime rates to increasing drug usage to economic anxiety. Of all these, they considered the deterioration of public schools to be the country's most pressing problem. "The American educational system will get worse instead of better," said 62% of them.

This is not a new concern. Frustrated by everything from a long-term decline in test scores to the rise in juvenile violence, many Americans are left scratching their heads in bewilderment. What has gone wrong? What can reverse these trends? Desperate for anything that might boost the academic achievement of their charges, many schools have turned to self-esteem theory, which promises that teaching children to feel good about themselves will help them perform better as students. This pedagogical approach has begun to dislodge the more traditional emphasis on basic subjects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic,

This is fundamentally wrongheaded. There is little reason to believe self-esteem leads to academic achievement or is even necessary for academic success. It is therefore crucial to delegitimize the education establishment's mindless glorification of self-esteem. As Richard Weissbourd has written in the *Vulnerable Child: What Really Hurts America's Children and What We Can Do about Them*, schools gripped by self-esteem theory "are, in essence, producing a generation of poorly educated adults who lack the habits of hard work and perseverance that have historically been necessary to achieving true success."

There is no shortage of ways to define self-esteem. Perhaps the simplest one is found in *Webster's Dictionary*: "satisfaction with oneself." The Basic Behavioral Science Task Force of the National Advisory Mental Health Council offers a fuller explanation: "Self-esteem begins to develop early in life and has been studied in children as young as seven years of age. As children learn to describe aspects of themselves, such as their physical attributes, abilities, and preferences, they also begin to evaluate them. Researchers conclude that, contrary to intuition, individuals have not one but several views of their selves, encompassing many domains of life, such as scholastic ability, physical appearance and romantic appeal, job competence, and adequacy as a provider."

Psychologists generally split self-esteem into two types: earned and global. The concepts of each differ in critical ways.

Earned self-esteem is attained by individuals through their own accomplishments—satisfaction from having scored well on an exam, for instance. Psychologist Barbara Lerner indicates that earned self-esteem "is based on success in meeting the tests of reality—measuring up to standards at home and in school." Earned self-esteem possesses all of the positive character traits that ought to be encouraged and applauded, because it ultimately is based on work habits.

Global self-esteem refers to a general sense of pride in one's self. It is not grounded in a particular skill or achievement. This means that an underachieving student still can bask in the warmth of global self-esteem, even if the door to earned self-esteem is shut. Although theorists contend that this feeling of self-worth will inspire academic success, the reality is different. At best, global self-esteem is meaningless. At worst, it is harmful. William Damon, an educational psychologist at Brown University, warns that heightened global self-esteem can lead children to have "an exaggerated, though empty and ultimately fragile sense of their own powers... [or] a distrust of adult communications and self-doubt."

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The fundamental difference between earned and global self-esteem rests on their relationships to academic achievement. The idea of earned self-esteem says that achievement comes first and that self-esteem follows. Global self-esteem theory—which is more popular in schools—maintains that self-esteem leads the way and achievement trails behind. Earned self-esteem needs no nurturing. It will develop almost naturally when youngsters have accomplished something worthwhile. Global self-esteem, though, is artificial. It requires active intervention on the part of teachers, parents, and other authority figures. It is more than mere encouragement—something all children need. Instead, it involves tricking kids into thinking that anything and everything they do is praiseworthy.

In 1986, a group of California state legislators convinced themselves that low self-esteem was the root cause behind a variety of social and economic problems such as drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and poor school performance. Before taking this line of thinking too far, however, they decided they needed some research to back up their claims. So they established the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, which published its findings in a book called *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*. The editors might as well have titled it *The Social Unimportance of Self-Esteem* because they found practically no connection between self-esteem and any of the behaviors they studied. As Neil Smelser noted in the introduction, "One of the disappointing aspects of every chapter in this volume...is how low the associations between self-esteem and its consequences are in research to date." Over the years, other reviewers have offered similar readings of the available research, pointing out the results are unimpressive or characterized by massive inconsistencies and contradictions. The California Task Force was not a disinterested group of scholars. They wanted to find a link. Nevertheless, when their research failed to turn one up, they had the honesty to admit it.

Scholars who focus on the connection between high global self-esteem and academic success have run into similar barriers. When psychologists Harold W. Stevenson and James W. Stigler tested the academic skills of elementary school students in Japan, Taiwan, China, and the U.S., the Asian students easily outperformed their American counterparts. That came as no surprise. However, when the same students were asked how they felt about their subject skills, the Americans exhibited a significantly higher self-evaluation of their academic prowess than their foreign peers. In other words, they combined a lousy performance with a high sense of self-esteem. As Stevenson and Stigler point out, schools teach their students to indulge in self-congratulation only after they have paid their dues, by years of learning and hard work. While educators in most countries are disdainful of pride—one manifestation of a high self-esteem—American teachers encourage it as positive personality trait.

Part of the problem Stevenson and Stigler found lies in American teachers' priorities in the classroom. They focus much more on sensitivity to students' egos, whereas Asians concentrate on their ability to explain things clearly. Indeed, roughly half of the Asian teachers surveyed stated that clarity is one of the most important attributes required to be a good teacher. Just 10% of them said that sensitivity is equally important. Given the same set of choices, American teachers reversed priorities. Moreover, American teachers avoid criticizing poor performance, fearing damage to students' self-esteem. Japanese and Chinese teachers, on the other hand, regard mistakes as an index of what remains to be learned through persistence and increased effort. American schools worry more about how students view themselves than about their actual academic performance...

Other studies show that programs created to promote self-esteem among elementary school students actually produce less of it than those designed to improve academic performance. The best research in this area evaluated a Federal Head Start program to help children in grades one to three, called Project Follow-through. The researchers appointed different schools to implement the project. To judge the effectiveness of self-esteem in underwriting academic success, they selected schools with differing philosophies of education. The models then were categorized into three major types: holistically oriented classrooms prone to promote self-esteem, behaviorally oriented models emphasizing traditional basic instruction, and combination models that joined the other two. Researchers examined 9,000 students on a variety of measure, from basic to cognitive and affective skills. Those taught using the behavioral model received the highest scores not only in academics, but

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on self-esteem. The researchers, therefore, could conclude safely that programs designed to provide young children with the tools for academic success tend to be more effective as they improve on both academic performance and self-esteem

This rule is not limited to young children. Thomas Moeller, a psychology professor at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Va., examined students in grades six and higher. In every instance, Moeller concluded, "academic achievement is more closely related to academic self-concept than to global self-concept."

Other research found that although academic achievement in one grade level predicts academic self-esteem in the next, neither academic achievement nor academic self-esteem has any identifiable effect on global self-esteem. Still other research finds that grades in a given discipline affect academic self-esteem just in that particular discipline. General academic self-concept finds its roots in a school's climate, teachers' ratings, and students' commitment to work.

Adolescents' academic performance seems not even to be a factor affecting global self-esteem. Instead, they respond to social activities. High school performance, academic ability, and socioeconomic status affect educational attainment more than global self-esteem...

Self-esteem theory made its first dramatic impact upon American schools in 1954, when the Supreme Court accepted that school segregation damaged the self-esteem of African-American children in its *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Low self-esteem, the Court said, "affects the motivation of a child to learn, and has a tendency to retard children's educational and mental development." According to author Barbara Lerner, this proposition makes ... questionable assumptions.

Ironically, [adolescents] living in impoverished neighborhoods are more likely to turn violent if schools bombard them with unearned praise. Baumeister, Boden, and Smart found that, when high self-esteem is challenged by others' negative views, egotism is threatened. People react in one of two ways. They either lower their self-appraisal and withdraw or maintain their self-appraisal and manifest negative emotions toward the source of the ego threat. This response easily can become violent in individuals who place high emphasis on their self-appraisals.

Every day in the name of self-esteem, schools cheat low-income children...into settling for inflated egos instead of increased knowledge. Such efforts aimed at guaranteeing minorities heightened self-esteem, coupled with lawsuits challenging minimum competency exams and proficiency tests, erroneously assume that these youngsters' self-esteem cannot possibly get proper nourishment in the poor households in which they are reared. Social workers and teachers create special courses and excuses for these kids on a regular basis.

In *The Vulnerable Child*, Weissbourd vehemently attacks such efforts, asserting that, "although poor children are more likely to suffer an array...of problems, the great majority of poor children are prepared to learn, at least when they begin school. Developmental delays and serious learning difficulties among children ages three to five are higher among poor than among middle- and upper-income children...But over 75 percent of poor children ages 6-11 have never experienced significant developmental delays, or emotional troubles, or a learning disability in childhood." Weissbourd highly discourages enrolling disadvantaged minority kids in remedial courses or special education classes because it makes it more difficult for them to move into the mainstream.

From lower standards to a reduced emphasis on tests, minorities constantly are told that their egos somehow are more fragile and thus different from the rest of America, even though they have the most to gain from traditional ways of teaching. In fact, blacks can flourish in this type of environment, as the experiences of schools such as Booker T. Washington (Atlanta), Xavier Prep (New Orleans), P.S. 91 (Brooklyn), and Dunbar (Washington, DC) have shown. African-Americans excel in these school because they are expected to strive high and achieve. Instead of offering a broad array of

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extracurricular classes or dumbing down their curriculum to increase the pupils' self-esteem, the schools offer a strict diet of math and reading and expect students to get the job done. As Sister Helen Struder, principal of the mostly black Holy Angels School in Chicago, notes, "After all, it's by success that you build self-esteem."

After years of failed experimentation, it is time to stop touting the importance of self-esteem and start providing students with the elements real self-esteem is made of. Building self-esteem not only is a smokescreen vis-a-vis academic success; it can lead to considerable harm. After all, as Weissbourd points out, "to develop effective coping strategies, children, in fact, need to learn to manage a certain amount of disappointment and conflict."

As schools turn against self-esteem theory, they must go back to the basics of teaching, reinstalling high standards and expectations, and holding children accountable for their actions. However, these efforts ought not replace paying attention to children's needs and concerns as individuals. Many educators agree on three general strategies: build the relationship between a teacher or parent and a child on respect of the child's inborn strengths; help the youngster set goals and then link sustained effort with success; and examine the values being promoted because self-esteem is grounded on what a person values.

The final and probably most important remedy is reintroducing parents in the education of their offspring. Experts unanimously agree that parental involvement in a child's education remains one of the most important factors in determining his or her academic success. Furthermore, parents supersede teachers at building earned self-esteem in their children through the special caring and positive/negative reinforcement that can come only with individualized interaction at home.

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